

From Day To Day, Envisioning Tomorrow...

- The Experience At Tilak Vihar

Some of those worst affected by the November 1984 anti Sikh violence in Delhi were resettled by government in flats in Tilak Vihar, west Delhi. After alleged terrorists killed Hindu bus passengers in Muktsar, Punjab, in July 1986, violence again erupted in Delhi against both Sikhs and Muslims. Violence erupted between residents of Tilak Vihar and harijans living in an adjoining slum. Two residents of Tilak Vihar were killed in police firing. Here, Lalita Ramdas and Jaya Srivastava, who have been working at a women's centre set up at Tilak Vihar in 1985 with government and SIDA funding, talk to Ruth Vanita about their experiences over these two years. From the description of the violence of July 1986 it becomes clear that this was a typical case of two oppressed sections of society, harijans and Sikhs victims of the 1984 riots, being turned against each other by forces who fostered and spread panic amongst them. It was not a "Hindu-Sikh" conflict based on religion, as it was widely reported to have been.

What is the work you have been involved in ?

Jaya : First of all, it was psychological rehabilitation. In the beginning, it was tough just getting the women to come to the centre. They were too depressed. We had to go from house to house to persuade them to come.

There were two groups—Punjabi Sikhs and Rajasthani Sikhs known as labhanas and sitlighars. The Punjabis were better off and better educated. Some of them were graduates. Rajasthani women were mostly illiterate.

How many of the women were employed ?

Lalita : Hardly any. So they found it hard to start organising their household in a new way, spending several hours away from home. Also, they faced a lot of problems which we had to help sort out. Things like getting fans, electricity meters and water connections. Or even getting cards made to enable them to get treatment from the dispensary.

We had taken a decision that of the 60 seats at the centre, 10 would be for women from outside Tilak Vihar, who may not be widows or Sikhs but who have also suffered in some way—been maltreated or abandoned by husbands,

for example. Because we felt it was important that the Sikh women should not live a totally isolated existence. They should not feel that nobody else anywhere in the world has suffered the way they have. Because this would be a hurdle in the way of their relating to the rest of the world.

Could you describe the activities at the centre ?

Lalita : We felt very strongly that

rehabilitation was not just an economic issue. It was not just a question of getting women to sew or knit or roll *papads* and make some money. We would have discussions where we would talk about what is happening in the country and also about family problems. If a woman was having problems at home, we would go to her home and talk to her family. We tried to mobilise groups in different blocks so



Shammi Bai

— Harminder Kaur

that women come to the support of any woman who needed help.

What kind of family problems arose?

Jaya: Many of the women were illiterate, and if their father-in-law told them to put their thumb impression on a paper, they had to obey. In this way, a lot of the compensation money was taken by brothers-in-law and fathers-in-law. But after experience and interaction, most of the women have become much wiser. Some of them have got back their money by putting pressure on their community *panchayats* or even by going to court. Fortunately, the houses are in the widows' names and cannot be transferred to anyone else. We have been impressing upon them that even if they remarry they should not transfer the ownership to the name of husband or children. Because that is the only security they have.

Is there family pressure to remarry?

Jaya : There is a lot of pressure to remarry within the family. Some women are willing to marry brothers-in-law. But others are unwilling because he is much younger than she is, or is disabled. Almost every widow has some male relative staying in her house. The feeling, of ultimate dependence on the male factor is very strong.

Some of those who have more independent personalities have been able to take their own decisions. But many still refer back to male relatives before they make a decision.

The fact of having a house has in some ways made a difference. When they realise that they are being exploited by in-laws, they start going to the bank or the court themselves.

What are the forms of community arbitration ?

Jaya : Each area and community has its own *panchayat*.

Do women participate ?

Jaya : Some of the older women may sit there but basically women have no voice. In the case of one young girl who was being pressured against her will to



August 15 function at the Centre

marry her brother-in-law, the *panchayat* met. She was young so she did not dare to speak. We sent one of our women volunteers with her. When she spoke up, the men threatened her, saying: "You people come here and make trouble, create dissension within the family. You are asking our women to become rebels."

Lalita : We hoped that the women would mobilise to help each other. We held several meetings where we tried to discuss the fact that many of them faced similar problems. So that if one of them was being beaten up at night, the others could come to her aid. In one or two cases, they were able to do it but it was not sustained. They fear community disapproval. And we volunteers are too few. We do not have enough time to concentrate on such work. We also have to see to the economic viability of the centre.

What were the difficulties there ?

Lalita : We had requested the administration to try and diversify the areas of work for women so that they did not have to be restricted to so called feminine occupations. Everybody said "Yes, Yes", but nothing was done. So we started giving them a stipend of Rs

250 a month. Some of them had never held a needle in their lives. They just could not develop the kind of expertise which would be required by export houses who give large orders. It was a very big problem. So we started getting raw materials, partly through donations, and then getting small items like children's clothing made which we tried to sell in the local market or through our own networks. But even that has not worked.

The administration tends to blame us for this, thinking we spend time on other things. But in fact, the problem is due to a market situation. Last year, for example, the day the death sentence was announced for Satwant Singh, when I went into the centre, I found an atmosphere of absolute gloom and despair. One way of dealing with it was to close the centre for the day and go home. But we decided to sit down and talk about how we felt. They said : "Look, if government can sentence these two people to death, surely at least one of those who were involved in killing our husbands and children can be given some kind of punishment ?" We said this was right and we should think of ways to put pressure on

government. Later, they said, they did not feel like working and would rather sing some songs. So we began to sing and then the inspector from the administration came in. I explained the situation to her but her predominant impression was "Look, it is all very well, but production must be higher." They think discussions and singing are a waste of time.

Jaya : There are also community pressures to keep the women depressed.

Lalita : The women would sing beautifully when we were together and go home full of enthusiasm. But, at home, their relatives would tell them that as widows, they ought not to sing or dance. They ought to know their place.

Jaya : But we thought it was essential to bring some music, some liveliness into their lives.

Lalita : It is not that they have forgotten their grief but they also say: "Well, we have to live, life has to go on."

How do you intend to solve the marketing problem ?

Jaya : The situation now is ambiguous. Because government had promised a job to each family. Many women have applied for jobs and 24 from our centre have got appointment letters. The jobs depend on their skills—as gardeners, attendants in hospitals, peons in schools, nurses, clerks, midwives. The minimum salary will be Rs 750 a month. This seemed very attractive and the women were excited. But they had fears. They said: "How will we travel such long distances ? We don't know the bus numbers."

So we tried to discuss and figure out what kind of help they would need. Earlier, too, we had been running adult literacy classes which did not go too well because the women would get exhausted and say: "We are stupid, we can't study at this age." But, when the question of jobs came up, we began to study maps of Delhi, bus routes. We made flash cards to help them recognise bus numbers.



Tilak Vihar — the flats and the harijan colony

They were also worried about the children. So we put forward a proposal to the administration that we would run a daycare centre, not just for infants, as we had done so far, but also for older ones when they came back from school, so that the mother would have an unworried work existence.

So there was a mental readiness to take up the challenge. But after the violence in July we have gone many many steps backward. Today they are saying "We do not have the courage to go so far to do jobs. How can we be sure that our children, who will be on their own here, will be safe ? How do we know the same thing will not happen again ?" The tragedy is that the only two men who were killed were from widow headed families.

Could you describe the violence of July 1986 ?

Lalita : At 7 a.m., the Hindu migrants who were staying in a temple in Tilak Nagar began their *siyapa* (public mourning) in Tilak Nagar. This was about a kilometre away from Tilak Vihar. But one of our volunteers who comes by bus at 10 a.m., says everything was quiet at that time. She went to the harijan colony and sat in the homes of two girls there who had been coming to our centre.

Since when has this harijan colony been there ?

Lalita : It has been there at least 20 years. All these years, government has been promising to regularise the colony and give them better accommodation but these promises were never honoured. Some of the harijans think that the flats at Tilak Vihar, constructed in front of the harijan colony, were originally for the harijans.

Had there ever been any fights between residents of Tilak Vihar and the harijan colony ?

Jaya : There was no direct conflict. But there was some underlying tension. There was a legacy of suspicion and distrust. Because the Sikhs say that in 1984 it was harijans who were hired to kill them. On the other hand, the harijans saw so many things being given to the Sikhs, centres being set up for them. In all these years, no such provision had ever been made for harijans.

Lalita : We have been trying to hold community meetings to identify common needs, for instance, sanitation problems which affect anyone living in that locality. Another such issue was that of children's education. The children of both Sikhs and harijans were having problems in school. We visited

‘Women Are Suffering’

An account by Lalita Ramdas of a discussion
at the Centre on April 5, 1986

Rajinder Kaur was sitting a little distance away, reading *Jansatta*. I called her and said: “Why don’t you read out something from the newspaper and we’ll have a class and a discussion.” They all agreed, but no one was willing to read aloud, so I picked up the paper and pointed to the first bold headline which said:

“Eight persons killed in Punjab.” I began as with a reading lesson and after prompting by the children, we got the women to read the line. Then we decided not to read what was written in the newspaper but to go around the circle and see what emerged from amongst us.

The women said :

There is fighting in Punjab.

There is curfew in Punjab.

People are dying in Punjab.

People are being killed in Punjab.

Then I asked them to make sentences about the women in Punjab. Here is the picture :

Women are suffering in Punjab.

Women are being widowed in Punjab.

Women are crying in Punjab.

Children are being orphaned in Punjab.

We then discussed who was killing and who was being killed ? They said that it was not Hindus who were being killed in larger numbers than Sikhs. It was Hindus dressed up as Sikhs who were responsible for the killings.

Why ? Because they wanted to further discredit and defame Sikhs. But outsiders are also responsible.

After some discussion around this, we talked about how information and news is disseminated, identifying the following : newspapers, radio, TV, visitors, films, letters from home.

Using this as a lead, I also shared what a Sikh army officer had reported about the situation in the punjab - that

today it was mainly non sikhs who were being killed.

We then went on to talk about the need to identify who in fact were the real enemies — were they all Hindus, all Muslims, all Sikhs? After a concerted “No” to that question, we tried to look at the possible sources of the problem : economic unrest, poverty, unemployment and the resultant frustrations.

We also talked about the tendency to come together under either religious or caste identities, thinking that those who belong to one religion necessarily share common problems, common interests.

This led on to our examining whether the creation of states based on religion had solved the problem of economic disparities in society. The women said that there were still a few rich and many poor people. We then talked about whether creating a Khalistan would in any way help people like them and other poor Sikhs. They were clear that it would not, and that killing of innocent people did not help anyone.

And then, suddenly, the dams burst. Devi Kaur, her eyes flashing anger, passion in her voice and face, started the wave: “All this talk is all very well but what about those who killed and burnt our loved ones, and looted our homes ? When will they be punished ? They still taunt us, they still roam the streets free. We cannot rest in peace until justice is done.”

They broke down and cried. I cried too. Was there a way to channelise this powerful emotion into a creative rather than a destructive force ? Did we as women indeed have a role to play in bringing about peace in a way that had perhaps not been tried before?

I was convinced that one had to go

on trying and all the women sat there, as though waiting. We could not end with such hopelessness.

And so one started again — slowly and painfully retracing not just the events but gradually drawing them beyond themselves to try to share the grief of the thousands of Muslim women, the women in Assam, the harijan widows across the country, the widows of the Sri Lanka Tamils and countless others. The attempt was to get them to look at themselves as part of all these women and therefore to try and understand that while no one could forget her personal loss, it was equally important to be able to decide in what way one would deal with it.

Then I told them the story of my friend who had lost her entire family—husband and two grown up daughters—because of the senseless action of some people. How she too was angry, bitter and left alone, but after a lot of struggle had decided that she would live her life without hatred for those who had been responsible and would try instead to work with and for people who were frustrated and angry.

We then spoke of many others who were affected similarly and said that the other option was for us as women who had suffered to hew this grief and anger into a strong, positive force for a new society, a new set of values, where killing and revenge need not be the only ways in which to deal with difficulties, conflicts and injustice.

I believe that we were all suddenly and collectively aware that a new and important idea had emerged which had the possibility of changing our lives and our thoughts. We left it at that point but the idea of working further on this line of action was certainly developed that morning and it was important to put it down for any of those working on similar issues to share.

the local schools. We found that teachers have inbuilt prejudices about harijan children. They think these children are of substandard intellect.

So, a beginning had been made. We wanted to form a small committee with representatives from both colonies which would take the initiative on common issues. We could not make much headway with this. We had a much better experience with the children. We had taken a group of children, some from Tilak Vihar, some from the harijan colony, some Muslims from Jama Masjid, and some from Nand Nagri, on a collective holiday to Bhimtal, under a social welfare board scheme. It went beautifully and that children's group still continues to meet. But when such violence occurs, it is a big setback.

How did the violence start ?

Lalita : Around 11 a.m., news got around that the Tilak Nagar *gurudwara* had been damaged. The house of a Sikh school principal and two shops had also been burned. Residents of Tilak Vihar panicked and started streaming out of their houses with *kirpans*, *lathis* and whatever they could find. They tried to go to the *gurudwara*. On the way, police stopped them. There was a confrontation. People were pushed back, and the police chased them. There was panic. Everybody ran. Some people ran into the harijan colony. The harijans thought the Sikhs were coming to attack them. It is difficult to determine who started the panic, whether it was Shiv Sena boys or who. But stone throwing began.

The police ordered the Sikhs to go into their houses but they refused because they remembered that in 1984, when they obeyed a similar order, they were massacred. So they stayed in the open, and threw stones from the rooftops at the harijan colony. Some harijans' huts were also burned. The police allege that some Sikhs used firearms but the Sikhs absolutely deny this. Anyway, the police, after *lathi* charge and tear gas, fired some rounds and two Sikhs were killed.

Jaya : So the Sikhs feel that the police fired at them and not at the harijans.

Why were the Hindu migrants from Punjab accommodated so close to Tilak Vihar?

Jaya : That is the irony of it. Why were they brought into the vicinity ? I met the group in Tilak Nagar and it appeared to me not as genuine and peaceful as the other two groups. The group in the Sanatan Dharm temple at Azad Market was quite genuine. They all the time said that they wanted to go back to Punjab because they have their properties there. They said their only demand was that the army be called out.

Lalita : We also met the group in the Arya Samaj temple, Mandir Marg. We asked if there was anything we could do for them. They said they did not require any material help but they wanted accommodation in Delhi as they were poorer people and were afraid to go back to Punjab. Some widows from Tilak Vihar also went with us and took food for the migrants. This group was quite genuine. They were full of grief and they could identify with the grief of the Sikh widows.

Jaya : I went alone to the Tilak Nagar group. The women came pouring forth

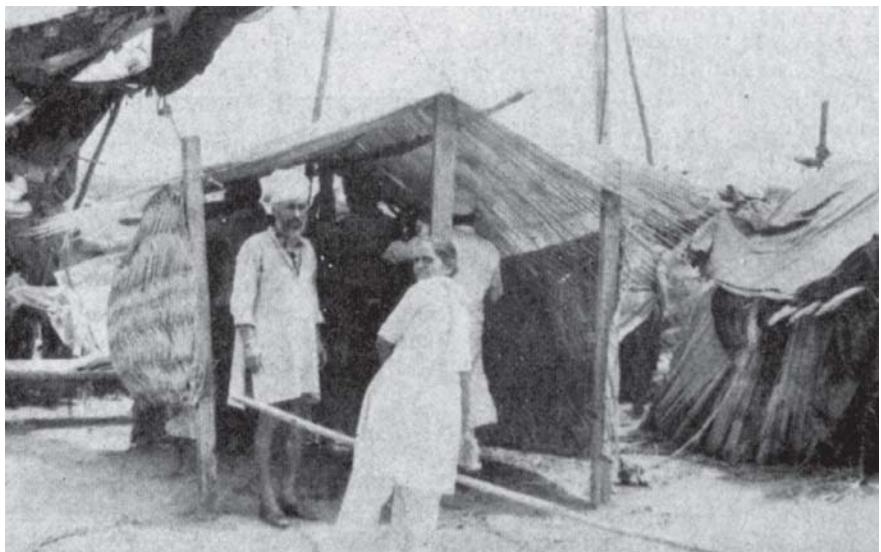
with their woes, how their family members had been killed. But when I talked to the men, they were vociferously and violently anti-Sikh. This was in mid July.

I asked them : "Can't small people like us unite ? We are staying in the same locality. The Sikh widows are here. Can't we meet and do something ?" They reacted very violently : "Why should we meet these Sikh widows ? All Sikhs are scoundrels. We don't want any help from them. Two or three Sikhs came yesterday to offer help but we refused, and sent them away. And these widows—all of them are bad charactered, prostitutes." I said: "Look, I work with them. There may be a few women who, because of their circumstances, have landed into such problems, but the majority are not so." They replied : "You are here only in the day. How do you know what goes on at night ?" They had burned an effigy of Barnala. I asked why that was necessary. They said it was the only way to attract people's attention and to get the police here, to protect them from the Sikhs.

These are migrants from Punjab ?

Jaya : Supposedly.

And no move was made to shift them



Residents of Tilak Vihar preparing to migrate to Punjab. Many are still living in shanties at Tilak Vihar

out of that area ?

Lalita : No. Why were they allowed to hold the *siyapa* ? The *siyapa* was a hysterical event, it created hysteria around it. At that time, there were about 100 migrant families. I have heard that some have now returned to Punjab. But I must say that even there, the women were able to have some sympathy with the widows.

Lalita : Yes. When we put it to them that those women had done nothing. Why should they have to pay with the lives of their husbands and children for the actions of somebody else ?

Jaya : There was in that temple one old lady who kept saying: "I have one son who is a Hindu, one son who is a Sikh. Tell me daughter, with whom should I live ?" So the women in all three groups were able to understand the tragedy of the other side. They were at least able to listen and understand.

Is there any visible presence of Shiv Sena in the area ?

Jaya : I have seen boys wearing the *trishul*. One harijan boy who was wearing it said the harijans are getting it free.

Lalita : There were also a lot of posters around.

What efforts were made to see that such violence does not recur ?

Lalita : Throughout the curfew period, we were the only non Sikhs who went there every single day. People would come rushing to us to tell their stories. Women would come and say: "Didi, you too could not do anything", and then they would hug and kiss us. This relationship is visible even to the men. They know we are working with them without any political or other motivation.

On August 15, we had a small cultural function at the centre where the children put up items very spontaneously and adults came to watch. After that, we sang and walked through the colony. Some of the young boys and men also joined.

The police had set up peace committees but we found that only a

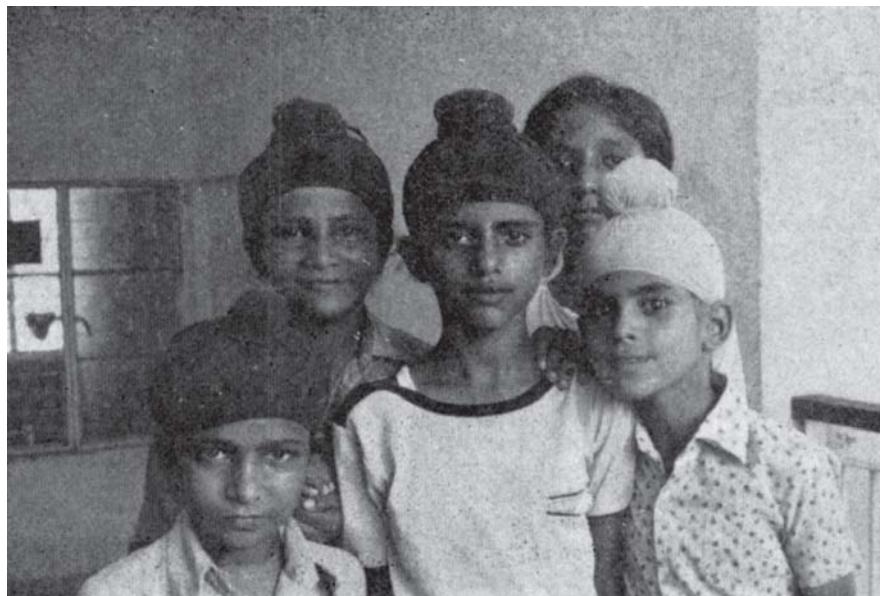
few male leaders were on the committee. We suggested to the police that some women who were mature and articulate should be on the committee.

But the women themselves did not feel confident enough and the police said: "They are not ready for it, they get too emotional." When we asked the women what they felt about the five men who were supposed to be their representatives on the peace committee, most of the women did not know who these men were. Those who knew them by name felt they were ruffians, and had nothing to do with their lives or

How do the women themselves see the situation ?

Lalita : On an emotional level, they react positively to our discussions. Whenever we have had an opportunity, we have tried to get the women to look outside of their own situation. We have talked about what is happening in Punjab and also about many other groups who are victimised in this country. Muslims have been the target of such violence for years. And there is not a day in this country when some harijan woman is not raped or killed.

Some months ago, we had



At the August 15 function

problems. So how on earth could they be spokesmen for them?

Most of these male leaders are from non widow headed families, of which there are 200. We have been in touch with these leaders in a peripheral way. We have a friendly kind of contact with the men on the whole, but it is not a continuing contact. I think they have realised that their interests and ours are, in a sense, inimical. We are saying women should stand up and be independent. That immediately threatens their leadership because today they are the spokesmen for the area, speaking on behalf of the women.

discussed how there are two ways of reacting to violence. One is that of revenge. We can also shoot and kill as others have done to us. The other is that maybe women have an alternative to the kind of violence in which men have so far participated. Can we say in a different voice that we do not wish to see another woman suffer what we have suffered ? Can we share our experiences as a weapon against violence ? There was an immediate swell of response to this. They could see that this was something that went beyond the feeling of being trapped in their own situation. They were ready to take a *shanti yatra*

(peace journey) to Punjab and even suggested going on from there to Gujarat. They tell us that when they are with us they feel fired with all kinds of possibilities. But then they go home and face pressures to conform, to quietly submit to male authority.

What are your future plans ?

Lalita : We plan to have full fledged programmes for the children and young people up to the age of 16 or so, with daycare, play activities, drama, sewing classes for the girls. Our proposal is still pending with the administration. We feel an intense need for male volunteers to work with the young boys aged 18-25.

How have your families and friends reacted to your work with the Sikh victims of violence ?

Jaya : Our immediate families have been completely supportive.

Lalita : Only occasionally problems

arise due to the increasing demands on our time. Holiday or no holiday, curfew or no curfew, we go off, and this leads to our not being able to attend certain family functions or official functions with our husbands. Yet we have received wholehearted support and, because of our involvement, the level of debate in our families has also changed. It has been a very valuable experience. We have felt so passionately that it has communicated itself to family and friends.

Jaya : Of course in the beginning I used to be asked : "My God, you go to the relief camps. They are full of Sikhs. Don't you feel afraid ?" That continues. Often, we argue through a whole evening with friends or colleagues.

Lalita : I think experience has a certain credibility of its own. We are not talking in the air or theorising. We are able to relate our ideas to our direct

experience, to give specific examples. It makes all the difference if you say : "Look here, this widow said she was ready to march to Punjab." That makes people think.

Jaya : But it is frightening how attitudes have hardened in the educated middle class. Sometimes you feel you are fighting against walls of foolishness and there is no point arguing.

Lalita : Sometimes you feel frustrated and hopeless.

Jaya : We are caught up in so many small things but the bigger forces come and sweep it all away.

Lalita : There is the role of the state, of the police, of political parties, the question of electoral politics and its structure, which reinforces communalist antagonisms. I think we need to enter into a reflective process to seek a future direction. I think not enough of that is being done. □

RENU DEWAN

How Tata Treats Its Women Employees

—A Report From Jamshedpur

Tata group of industries is one of the largest groups in India and prides itself on looking after its workers well so that they do not need to resort to agitation. However, Tata employs very few women as regular workers, preferring to farm out work to women under the contract system, whereby they remain deprived of basic rights as workers. This report indicates how women's labour is exploited under the garb of "social welfare work" even by big industrial houses.

TELCO, the Tata run company in Jamshedpur, runs several social welfare institutions, one of which is Mahila Sharan (women's refuge). It was started 10 years ago for widows of male workers who are disabled or killed by accidents in the factory.

Telco has handed over the management of Mahila Sharan to All India Women's Conference, (AIWC), the women's wing of the Congress (I). The wives of senior officers of Telco

are prominent members of AIWC. They are paid salaries and also get facilities such as cars and phones.

Mahila Sharan is classified as a mini industry, employing 300 women. Its products are bought by Telco for its factory workers, thus saving the company considerable expenditure.

There are several sections in Mahila Sharan. One section employs 33 women to prepare 1,000 lunch packets every day for factory workers. Each woman

has to prepare 30 packets a day and also break firewood for the stoves and wash utensils. The women are paid Rs 175 a month. The *laddu* section employs 23 women to make 350 kilos of *laddus* every day. Each woman has to make 1,500 *laddus* daily and is paid Rs 175 a month. Another section employs 35 women to make seven cable harnesses a day for a monthly salary of Rs 400. These harnesses are used in Telco trucks.